

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Themis Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City: From Urban Renewal to Zero Tolerance*, New York: Routledge, 2011. ISBN 978-0-415-89158-5 (cloth)

The removal of the Occupy Wall Street encampment from Zuccotti Park, a.k.a. Liberty Plaza, in November of 2011 was a telling moment from an urban policy perspective. The intensive amount of coordination, subterfuge, secrecy, and force used by the New York City Police Department to remove the protesters signaled that Occupy had struck a nerve and generated substantial unease among City officials and others. Further, the police action was accompanied by a remarkable public relations operation wherein a few potent ideas were mobilized to effectively justify the use of force against a peaceable political assembly, rendering the removal socially palatable and even ostensibly just. Mayor Michael Bloomberg deployed arguments about quality of life, the imperative to control disorder, and the need to ensure the rights of a broader public. As Bloomberg (2011) explained in a formal statement, “Unfortunately, the park was becoming a place where people came not to protest, but rather to break laws, and in some cases to harm others. There have been reports of businesses being threatened and complaints about noise and unsanitary conditions that have seriously impacted the quality of life for residents and businesses in this now-thriving neighborhood”.

Some compelling questions are evident here. Were petty crime, noise complaints, and sanitation violations really at the heart of the angst expressed by New York City’s power elite? How is it that a handful of very particular complaints were capable of dislodging a national, if not global, social movement from a professedly public space in a city that likes to think of itself as cosmopolitan and tolerant? To answer these questions, ideas about urban disorder must be situated in the context of far-reaching political-economic and ideological shifts that have been decades in the making. Themis Chronopoulos’ book, *Spatial Regulation in New York City: From Urban Renewal to Zero Tolerance*, does the painstaking work of outlining how these abstractions emerged from that larger context, and in so doing makes a potentially valuable contribution to urban geography.

Spatial Regulation uses a series of Manhattan-based case studies to meticulously trace more than 60 years of “spatial ordering” in New York City. Chronopoulos’s primary contention is that an abiding concern with disorder is not new among City officials and elites - that such concerns did not arise instrumentally with neoliberalism as is often assumed, but have been evident in urban policy practices dating back at least as far as 1945. Within this timeframe, the book delineates two historically distinct modes of ordering in New York City. The first, in place from the 1940s to the late 1960s, was an expression of the government-led planning of that period, typified by public investment in large projects of urban renewal. This “liberal” approach attempted to produce order in and through concrete space by strategically building infrastructure, redeveloping certain dilapidated areas to create buffer zones between affluence and poverty, and generally using the design of the built environment as a means of intervening in social reproduction. However, these ordering practices subsequently shifted with the deindustrialization and urban fiscal crises that began in the early 1970s. Those economic shifts produced forms of social destabilization that demanded intervention on the part of the city and the state. However, Chronopoulos argues, producing order through project-based renewal was no longer an option given the conservative political climate and severe fiscal constraints that arose with these crises. Operating within such conditions, New York City officials increasingly utilized less resource-intensive tactics such as “quality of life” and “zero tolerance” approaches that used criminalization and social control to target symbolic disorder - things like graffiti and trash, but also certain groups, people, and behaviors that were perceived as potential threats to private property and the liberties of others - and banish it from public space. These approaches became the core of a second “neoliberal” mode of ordering that is arguably still dominant today.

Though Chronopoulos strives to distinguish between the two modes of spatial ordering, the argument is made more intriguing by several qualities that appear common to both. Both modes attempt to organize urban space in a way that appeals to the interests of the middle class and to elites. Both implicitly frame the poor and racial minorities as disorderly. Finally, both may have been most effective at achieving their goals to the extent that they simply displaced populations perceived as problematic. Meanwhile, both modes differently reflect deep anxieties about making urban space conducive to the needs of capital accumulation - first under Fordist industrial socio-economic conditions and later under conditions of post-industrial or tertiary-driven restructuring.

Ultimately, the most tantalizing spatial-social implications of *Spatial Regulation* are underdeveloped. Chronopoulos is a historian who understandably privileges chronology and archival detail far more than analysis of the forces and social relations that are spatially expressed in the particular examples. The radical insinuations of the book - that later 20th century urban policy in New York City was an elite class project, that the ordering of urban space is essential to the circulation of capital, that this ordering involves not only absolute spatial strategies but, increasingly, abstract space as well, and that these processes work largely by channeling and effacing difference - are thinly stated and mainly left to the conclusion. Rather than being a shortcoming, however, this understatement might best be viewed as an incitement to further theorization and scholarship. Many geographers, for example, will already have a keen sense for how Chronopoulos's detailed historical effort might lend valuable support to broader theoretical or political arguments. Especially if read in parallel with other home-grown accounts of the policy shifts in New York City during this time-span (e.g. Angotti 2008; Mollenkopf 1989; and Tabb 1982), *Spatial Regulation* offers a very rich grounding of contemporary spatial politics and urban policy debates.

From the analytical vantage point opened up by *Spatial Regulation*, the tensions which marked the eviction of Occupy can be understood with particular clarity. The abstractions about quality of life and disorder, so readily brandished by Mayor Bloomberg, took decades to become part of the common sense urban vernacular. Still, in a matter of weeks, Occupy was able to upset the seemingly ossified, orderly city and expose - even if briefly - exactly for what and whom it is really ordered. Meanwhile, the public that the City so calculatingly mobilized to protect that night was not the actual public embodied by the protests or even the public of lower Manhattan, but the imagined public of capital as it circulates through urban space. Perhaps the protests were able to so disquiet the power elite because they struck on an effective two-pronged spatial tactic, presenting a potential threat to fixed capital in concrete space while simultaneously offering a compelling counter to several of the powerful abstract imaginations that have become central to circulation in post-industrial New York City and globally. There are potent reminders here that mechanisms of inequality are deeply embedded in urban space, which is precisely why the urban is a crucial space and a vital resource for political struggle.

References

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May 2012